Freud's Last Session: Not the Last Word

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By **Aidan Pollock** — March 19, 2024 — **REVIEWS** 5 Mins Read



Credit: Sharmill Films

I know few historical figures that, if asked to write from their perspective, intimidate me more than Sigmund Freud. The inventor of Western psychoanalysis. Freud's existence in popular imagination is either as a joke or a charlatan, with no indifference

mixed-in. Directed by Matthew Brown, *Freud's Last Session* places Freud in conversation with C.S. Lewis, a meeting that is hypothesised to have taken place near the outbreak of the Second World War. *Freud's Last Session* moves gracefully, and serves well as a stepping stone towards humanising such a divisive figure, but doesn't convincingly reach the depths expected from the interactions of these two figures.

Ensconced in the uncertainty at the dawn of global war, *Freud's Last Session* leads us along a day-in-the-life of the atheistic and currently dying-of-mouth-cancer Freud, who has asked the famously Christian author and Oxford Don, C.S Lewis, to his home for a meeting. Running parallel to this is the story of Anna (Liv Lisa Fries), Freud's daughter, who we witness juggling between her relationship with Dorothy Burlingham, her work as lecturer at a university, and her claustrophobic attachment to her father.

Within this setup, Brown is interested in the setting as a character snapshot. With the entire film taking place over the better-half of a single day (although with copious flashbacks), the sense of the film is of a very 'United Kingdom' type of flair, with the usual British wit (delivered by Mathew Goode) being juxtaposed with Freud's (Anthony Hopkins) German analyticism. The words/weapons of theist and atheist are not swung like heavy pendulums, but deposited upon each other's minds like plover's eggs. This gentleness, buttressed by Hopkins' chuckle and the face Goode takes on when he is listening, is nearly the entirety of the film. This exudes mainly in the second-half, where it feels that these two men have become something of friends, each learning to respect the views of the other, and their intricacies.

This tension between comfort and discomfort is the main fulcrum of the film. All of us are stereotypers, who we present at the outset is what we most believe we are. It is with comfort that we lay down our outer-layers and allow others to know us more intimately. Towards the start, we are introduced to the popular image of Freud, one of a cantankerous, cold, and neurotic man. Reversely, C.S Lewis is the British gentleman, christian, aloof, and endearing. As the day passes, both take off their defensiveness and ego like coats and hats, more alike, more human. Anna too sheds her skin from the child trapped under Freud's arm to become a person of agency, her journey providing a well-inflicted criticism of Freud as a father, while also providing her equal respect as a psychoanalyst of her own measure.

Due to the temporal construction of the film, we see Freud only as a glimpse, like a portrait carried from one room of an art gallery to another. As such, Brown rejects the assumption of knowing any of these figures for more than a few hours, and while he manages to indulge in the beautiful hypocrisy of Freud, *the* Freud, being so infuriatingly hypocritical "Well, I'm human. I'm inherently flawed, and I'm deeply damaged. And no doubt, I'm damaging to others," his characterisation comes off as hopeful, rather than condemnatory.

This movie is a hypothetical meeting between two very real people. While the lashes of each sentence do not strike as hard due to this fictionalisation, what is afforded is a level of personal conclusion that regularly eludes us, especially on such a short time-scale. Each character is enabled to say what they want, in the right way, and to live in the interstitial area between reality and make-belief. To that end, Anna and her partner Dorothy are the most alive of all the cast — owing possibly to their relative lack-of-fame, and thus their freedom to be written as actual people. The acting throughout is exactly what it needs to be, and has the delivery of a stage-play, of people who know they are being watched by an anonymous eye.

As Brown does not come down on any particular viewpoint, excepting his reasonable position of Freud and Anna's relationship as rather co-dependent, I don't feel comfortable landing on either side of this film. There is a dullness to each character, as though Brown is slightly too gentle with his dialogue, or nervous to truly enliven Freud to his fullest. There is another movie under this, one more exacting, and less warm, and it is uncertain whether that is the film Brown was originally trying to make.

The end product, as it stands, is neither hot nor cold. It is potato-and-leek soup on a rainy day. A dramatic stare here-and-there closes out certain scenes, characters stop speaking just before a phone conveniently rings, and nobody really gets all that angry at each other. Freud dying of mouth cancer does not elicit the same response as Hopkins' *The Father.* The scepticism aura-ing each character suffuses, never suffocates. *Freud's Last Session*, while a grave title, has a feather touch. If this movie marks a revitalisation of Freud as person rather than Freud as stereotype, perhaps it is appropriate that his unearthing requires a little tenderness.

Freud's Last Session will be in select theatres on April 18.

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